

# Internalized Classism: The Role of Class in the Development of Self

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**SUMMARY.** Internalized classism refers to the process by which a person's experience as a member of the poor or working classes becomes internalized and influences her self-concept and self-esteem as well as her relationships with others. Internalized classism, often not recognized by clients or by therapists, may be manifested in a variety of ways in psychotherapy. Active clinical attention to internalized classism can carry significant benefits for people with poor or working-class backgrounds. [Article copies available from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-342-9678.]

All forms of social oppression, by definition, exist and exert their influences at the sociopolitical level. All forms of oppression exert influences at the personal level as well. One of the many modes through which social oppressions affect the individual is through the process of internalized oppression (Akbar, 1984; Batts, 1989;

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Kadi, 1994). This internalization occurs through a complex system of introjections and identifications. The results of the process of internalization include aspects of the self system that are related to one's experiences with being a member of a disapprobated group in the larger world. With respect to classism in particular, the internalization of the experience(s) of being poor or working class has implications for a person's self-concept and self-esteem. Because class is a pervasively denied phenomenon, the effects of internalized classism are recognized infrequently by the person herself or by her therapist.

In this paper, I offer some observations about the nature of internalized classism as I have encountered it in the course of my work as a psychologist and psychotherapist. My interest in these issues arose in the context of my work with adult clients as we struggled together to understand the sources of some of their difficulties and the paths toward the resolution of those difficulties. My interest in internalized classism, then, has been abetted by numbers of clients who were willing to examine the role of class background as one among many issues in their psychotherapies. My understanding in this area also has been supported by my personal efforts to illuminate the role of class in my own life, both historically and currently.

### ***INTERNALIZATION OF CLASS EXPERIENCES***

Much of the focus on classism and other forms of oppression typically is on the external manifestations of that oppression. External manifestations constitute an essential part of the story, of course. As Higgins (1994) has observed: "Low-income status can be considered intrinsically abusive, as it exposes children and adolescents to many other associated stressors, such as poor nutrition, community violence, and substandard housing and health care" (p. 9). But the external manifestations of classism do not constitute the complete story. It is one thing to know, for example, that during her childhood a client had frequent periods of time when food was limited. It is also important to understand how this person felt about her lack of food, how she made sense of the scarcity, and what that scarcity was interpreted to mean about herself, her parent(s), and others.

Obviously, any good psychotherapy is going to include attention to a person's internal experience, and not solely to the external manifestations of poverty. That obviousness notwithstanding, very limited formal attention to the internalized experiences of class status is given to psychotherapists in training. Therapists are left to wrestle with the influences of class on a case-by-case basis without the advantage of a framework for thinking about class and its influences on the self in a more systematic fashion. This paper suggests some of the phenomena that might be of significance in developing a framework for examining class issues in the course of clinical work.

The utility of such a framework rests in its potential to demystify one very important thread of a client's experience, thus rendering her understanding of herself more complete than it would otherwise be. A further use rests in allowing the client to clarify the boundaries between the results of her own actions and the results of political forces over which she does not exert direct control. While there are benefits to a systematic use of class and its internalization, there is also an attendant danger. If class is reduced exclusively to a personal issue, there is no possibility of addressing class as a political issue and, therefore, no consideration of issues of justice (Hart, 1994). It is necessary to strive for some middle ground wherein the influence of class and internalized classism at an individual level is recognized but not to the degree that renders the political nature of class invisible.

### ***THE ELUSIVE NATURE OF CLASS***

A number of properties associated with class contribute both to its complexity and to its elusiveness as a focus for psychotherapy. Put another way, those properties of class serve as the basis for much of the resistance, on the part of the therapist as well as the client, to dealing with class in psychotherapy. Class is, of course, a continuous variable rather than a categorical one. The demographic variables that have been most extensively elucidated in terms of their effects on people have been either categorical in nature (e.g., gender) or at least widely treated as though they are discretely categorical (e.g., sexual orientation). One difficulty presented by a

continuous variable like class is that any individual has trouble locating herself along the class continuum. The task of addressing the effects of class on one's life is daunting when one is not able to ascertain her own class status with precision.

Adding to the murky nature of class is the fact that class boundaries in the United States are not very clear, especially in comparison to class distinctions in many other countries (Chrystos, 1994). The vagueness of class distinctions is compounded by the myth that the United States is a classless society (Allegra, 1994). Despite this myth, virtually everyone uses and is influenced by stereotypes about class (Penelope, 1994). As a result of all of this, class differences most often get talked about as individual differences (Wolfe, 1994) or they get conflated with other demographic characteristics (Anderson, 1994). The ability to discuss class is further complicated by our not having anything but a very limited language for talking about it (Allegra, 1994; Fay & Tokarczyk, 1993). Outside the language of Marxism, we essentially lack a rhetoric for class. In fact, money—one very important basis for class—is viewed as a taboo subject for discussion, not only in the world at large (Wolfe, 1994) but also in psychotherapy (Krueger, 1986), including in feminist therapy (Brown, 1994). Having more developed rhetorics for sexism and racism has not necessarily reduced the negative impact of those phenomena, but it has given us greater possibilities for clarity in both perception and communication about them.

The multidimensional nature of class also contributes to its elusiveness. While class often gets reduced to money, it is not just a matter of money. As Bart (1994, p. 4) has observed, class is "not just about money—it's about power and Prestige [*sic*] and self-concept and self-image and 'lifestyle,' and whether you can get your teeth straightened or your nose straightened . . . and whether you want to do so." A single individual's experience may encompass a combination of class influences. Yeskel (1994), for example, describes the combination of a working-class income with middle-class expectations regarding education. The complexities of class for a given individual may be reflected in differences in class backgrounds between/among parent figures (Zana, 1994). It is not a simple matter to specify the class background, for example, of a woman whose mother grew up in the owning class, whose father

grew up poor, and whose current family unit functions in the middle class.

Yet another source of complexity is class mobility (Hart, 1994). Chancy captures the phenomenology of class mobility when she writes: "Class mobility is living in different worlds with different languages. Class mobility is different worlds living in you with different values, different wants, different demands" (1994, p. 175). Any person's current class situation may or may not be consistent with her class status at any other time in her life. Class mobility has different implications for women than it does for men, with upwardly mobile women experiencing greater estrangement and less support from their families than do upwardly mobile men (Bart, 1994). The picture of class often is confounded by its overlap with other factors such as gender (Fox, 1994) and race (Allegra, 1994). Class status for women historically has been defined through their relationships with men (Penelope, 1994), for example.

Beyond those general sources of vagueness related to class, a given person may be (additionally) confused about class for very specific reasons ranging from having been shielded about the realities of class status by parents (de la Pena, 1994); a desire to put the pain of class behind her (Lee, 1994); guilt associated with class privilege (Alicen, 1994; Yeskel, 1994); and the desire of a person with poor/working-class roots to now "pass" as middle class (Elliott, 1994).

### ***INFLUENCES OF CLASS ON THE SELF***

In principle, the influences of class on one's sense of self could be specified for any individual, no matter where she is located on the class continuum. While not denying that upper-class and middle-class backgrounds have significant impact on one's sense of self (e.g., Ehrenreich, 1989), my focus is on the effects on self-development that arise from early membership in poor and working classes. This focus is consistent with the usual views of internalized oppression which address processes by which one's experiences as a member of a disapproved group are internalized and become associated with the self system.

It is critical that any discussion of internalized oppression be

rooted in the appreciation that aspects of internalized oppression are not intrinsic properties of the individual. Nor are they intrinsically associated with the characteristic that is targeted for oppression—e.g., being female or being a person of color or being poor. Rather, much of internalized oppression results more or less directly from an individual's exposure to systematically negative social conditions. It is the experience of being in those negative social conditions that is internalized by the person. Many of the aspects of internalized oppression have their roots in attitudes and behaviors that, in fact, have/had adaptive value in the context of social oppression (Akbar, 1984; Batts, 1989).

Perhaps the most frequent manifestation of internalized classism I have encountered is the felt sense of being different or "the other." Dorothy Allison, in an essay that explores her own class roots, describes this sense of being different in a way that makes clear its negative connotation: "That fact, the inescapable impact of being born in a condition of poverty that this society finds shameful, contemptible, and somehow deserved, has had dominion over me to such an extent that I have spent my life trying to overcome or deny it" (Allison, 1994, p. 15).

Allison's description captures the pervasive quality of this sense of being different. It also points to the explicit sense of badness or wrongness or unacceptability that accompanies it. Sometimes, the specific negative tone in internalized classism seems directly to reflect a myth about being poor or working class that a person has "taken in" and applied to herself. Shame seems to be a nearly ubiquitous aspect of internalized classism. Put another way, shame may be one of the prices paid for membership in poor/working classes (Alicen, 1994; Chancy, 1994). The presence of shame is hardly surprising when one considers the nature of what is said and what is thought without being said about poor people. Shame is hardly surprising when one considers how it *feels* to not have enough and to go without, especially when others do seem to have enough.

It seems to be difficult for a youngster growing up in very trying circumstances to avoid the association between being poor and being bad. One client captured this association very clearly when she spoke of the life-long feeling that she was "dirty." She initially used the word to denote a sense of badness about her very self. As

we pursued that sense of herself, it became clear that this self-feeling was strongly associated with the experience of having lacked household plumbing and, therefore, regular access to bathing. As a result, she often was not clean and smelled bad, something that did not go unnoticed by her schoolmates. Though the particular modes by which it occurs vary greatly, it seems inevitable that a child growing up in poverty will conclude—sometimes with thought and sometimes without—that her social and economic circumstances have something to do with who she is and what she really deserves.

If a child's economic hardship seems to her to reflect something about herself, it often seems that it reflects something about her parents as well. Allison (1994) writes of trying to figure out how her parents could have worked so long and so hard and yet they were still poor. This is a complex puzzle for a child who has also believed the myth that people are treated fairly and hard work is rewarded. Evans (1994), who grew up poor, describes an interaction that occurred when she was an adult. Among a group of friends, one asked, "What kind of parents wouldn't provide their children with something as important as dental care?" (Evans, 1994, p. 163). Evans fell silent, knowing that she had not gone to a dentist until she was in her mid-teens, and only then because she was visiting relatives who took her.

Clients have spoken about similar sorts of dilemmas in trying to explain to themselves, and sometimes to others as well, why they were not able to get medical care or other things that seemed important. The potential for angry feelings toward parents—always a complex issue—is very strong (Murphy, 1994). One client spoke of the vivid awareness she had that her parents were not withholding things from her; they simply did not have the money. Even as a young child, she silently debated whether it was more difficult to hold on to her anger with her parents or to acknowledge the empathic pain she felt for their deprivation on top of the pain she already experienced about her own. Poor and working-class parents are not only critical and ongoing influences on their children's lives; they also are the primary and obvious candidates for identification by their children. The processes of identification may be complicated when, based on economic factors, parents evoke such ambivalent feelings from their children.

I have seen clinical evidence that suggests that poverty can influence the timing and nature of a child's differentiation and individuation from parents. People like to escape from very difficult circumstances as quickly as possible. In the case of a child in a family living in poverty, escape from trying circumstances may be the psychological equivalent of distancing from her family. The distancing may be motivated by anger or by a growing intolerance of the pain of poverty or by both. It appears that, at least in some cases, the child has been attempting to get away from the passivity and hopelessness of poverty as much as from the parent(s) themselves. This sort of premature separation typically results in grief as well as in independence that comes too early. It may feel to the child—and later to the adult—like a betrayal of one's origins (Chrystos, 1994) and one's family (Chancy, 1994). Chancy (1994) has described one of the feelings associated with this premature withdrawal as the sense that one is acceptable only if she is apart from her roots. This issue gets talked about clinically in similar terms, often arising in the context of discussions by adults about their ambivalence in relation to their families of origin.

Another manifestation of internalized classism in clinical settings occurs for people whose adult economic status is markedly better (and there is no question which is a "better" and which a "worse" class status) than that of their childhoods. Such individuals sometimes report the sense that they don't really "belong" in the new class. They feel like "impostors" or "cheaters" or "phonies" (de la Pena, 1994, p. 205). This sense may or may not overlay a childhood history that included lying about one's family's economic resources (Livia, 1994). Clients may recall intentional efforts to imitate people from upper classes (Penelope, 1994). Allison's (1994, p. 22) description of her effort to distance herself from her roots reveals the cost of doing so: "I copied the dress, mannerisms, attitudes, and ambitions of the girls I met in college, changing or hiding my own tastes, interests, and desires." Distancing from one's roots may involve distancing from one's own awareness and/or acceptance of oneself. And for many who have managed to escape to a higher class, there exists the fear (Allison, 1994) or the expectation (Evans, 1994) of being poor again. The fear and expectation make sense when one considers that escaping the bonds of the passivity and hopelessness

that are so often among the consequences of oppression may be as challenging as moving from a lower to a higher class status.

In addition to these substantive issues, it warrants noting that clinical work on internalized classism often prominently involves a number of affects. Loss and grief are not uncommon in work with class issues. They may be related to the hardship the client has experienced, to what she has kept hidden from herself, and to what has been lost in relationships with family members and others. Envy (McMichael, 1994; Murphy, 1994) both historically and contemporaneously based, is often in need of attention. In my experience in working with internalized classism, it is almost always necessary to work on the exploration and resolution of shame. Anger also is frequently encountered in working with class. This anger sounds much like that so often heard in psychotherapy: that life is unfair. The anger may be expressed in relation to one's family of origin, to one's childhood acquaintances, or to society in general. In the latter case, client and therapist are challenged to validate anger about social injustices while avoiding the pitfalls of the client's adopting a perpetual state of feeling either like a victim or bitter (Batts, 1989). It has not been uncommon for clients to direct some of their anger at me for charging fees or for the level of those fees as they are expanding their understanding of the effects of social inequities on their lives.

Any of the issues related to internalized classism may be of real significance for clients who grew up in poor or working classes. Addressing those issues in isolation, however, runs the twin risk of overstating the importance of class and implying that everything can be reduced to class experiences. In actuality, of course, class is only one of the myriad issues that are candidates for clinical attention. The problem is that clients do not usually bring up class or think that it is relevant to treatment. It, therefore, often falls to the therapist to point toward the role of class in a client's life.

#### *BENEFITS OF WORKING WITH INTERNALIZED CLASSISM*

The benefits of working on issues of internalized classism can be significant, especially when that work is done with a balance of

attention to the personal impact and the political significance of class. Despite the intrinsic political nature of class, it deserves attention at a very individual and personal level. Allison (1994, p. 35) has observed: "Class, race, sexuality, gender—and all the other categories by which we categorize and dismiss each other—need to be excavated from the inside."

It is important for people, whether or not they are in psychotherapy, to understand the effects of class on their lives, past and present. This understanding can be very illuminating. Penelope observes that putting her life experiences in the context of class resulted in "... a new and unfamiliar perspective" (Penelope, 1994, p. 42). Pytz (in Robbins, 1994) suggests that her nascent understanding of class resulted in a shift from attributing her problems to being stupid to attributing her problems to her class membership. Yeskel (1994) compares emerging awareness of class as a process by which a formerly flat view of the world becomes three-dimensional. Kadi argues that identifying the effects of class allows one to move from a position of "the conquered self that accepts oppressive acts as normal and acceptable to a position of "the conquest of self characterized by the determined and successful struggle to reclaim one's personhood (Kadi, 1994, p. 442). Speaking in a more explicitly political voice, Freire (1993) describes enhancing class awareness as a process by which an individual wins back the power to name her world and moves from the position of object to the position of subject.

In the process of appreciating the negative forces associated with class in one's life one is able to reclaim her individual and collective history (Kadi, 1994). Working through the pain and anger of internalized classism allows one to move toward greater strength and wholeness. It may allow one to find community with others who share class experiences. Sometimes the working through of internalized classism results in improvements with members of one's family of origin.

Working with internalized classism gives a person the opportunity to work in a very active fashion at the intersection of the personal and the political—an exciting, challenging and potentially empowering intersection where the social context affects the individual and, just as surely, the individual can affect her social context. Working at this juncture requires one to separate the internal from the exter-

nal and to see the interaction between the two with a new clarity. This often results in the development of a more highly refined sense of personal boundaries. In many cases, working at this juncture will inspire some degree of political activity, an important aspect in the process of healing from a variety of negative experiences (Herman, 1992). In any event, working on class issues at this person-environment juncture carries important lessons for working with other types of internalized oppression.

Curiously, the exploration of internalized classism can also pave the way to an appreciation of the positive effects of a working-class or poor background. Clients have noted a new appreciation for their own ability to be frugal and for their awareness that they know how to survive on very little. One client spoke of her increased willingness to take professional risks as a result of her enhanced respect for how well she could, if necessary, deal with hard times. Several clients have mentioned the exquisite appreciation they have for material goods. Even simple things are not taken for granted but are enjoyed with a markedly aesthetic quality. Allison (1994) offers that her experience with childhood poverty has resulted in an ability to tolerate being held in contempt, an ability that promotes the possibility for independence in the face of personal and political criticism. McMichael (1994) and Weaver (1993) observe that growing up poor or working class often results in a kind of generosity: not only does a person not want to live in poverty but she also does not want others to live in such circumstances either.

For whatever the values and disadvantages of growing up working class or poor, there does seem to be real value in working through the internalization of those experiences. Dorothy Allison speaks directly to the value of understanding and integrating class background when she writes:

I grew up poor, hated, the victim of physical, emotional, and sexual violence, and I know that suffering does not ennoble. It destroys. To resist destruction, self-hatred, or lifelong hopelessness, we have to throw off the conditioning of being despised, the fear of becoming the *they* that is talked about so dismissively, to refuse lying myths and easy moralities, to see ourselves as human, flawed, and extraordinary. All of us—extraordinary. (Allison, 1994, p. 36)

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